

CHOICES AND CHALLENGES SYMPOSIUM: October 8-10, 2004

Summary Remarks: John A. Fleckner
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My remarks today focus on the second of the two goals of this symposium, “encouraging collaboration.” We have accomplished that goal in an immediate sense through the peer to peer, professional networking which we have enjoyed in formal sessions and in the many informal gatherings with colleagues over meals and drinks. Such extended opportunities for face to face communication are all too rare in these time-pressured and resource-stretched days. We also have identified problems, issues, threats, and opportunities which can only be addressed effectively by the collaboration of professionals. Among these are professional education, the creation of sustainable digital collections, and the development of common curricula for preservation management.

There is, however, another aspect of collaboration which has recurred as a theme of this symposium: the necessity, even urgency, of collaboration of a much wider scope and on a far greater scale. The preservation of a record of the past, and the creation of knowledge from that record, are a profoundly collaborative process not only among preservation professionals and scholars, but with specific public audiences, and with all of us -- collectively -- as citizens and members of a shared civil society. As preservation professionals our role is both to create effective processes and techniques for this work of “doing history” (in the very largest sense) and to articulate the larger social purpose of our enterprise. The public -- in the sense of the citizenry as a whole -- supports us with social status and prestige, with certain legal protections (such as tax exemption and “fair use”), and with private and public resources. And it does so to the extent it finds our case for preserving history compelling.

Max Evans directly addressed these concerns in his opening paper, referring to “strategic choices that archivists -- and their sponsors and customers -- can make, to create a new, collaborative environment, where choices are shared among a community of stakeholders.” In these new arrangements, archivists will exploit the latest information technologies (for example metadata harvesting, graphic presentation of digital data, and smart systems) and engage the interests and efforts of archives users. The latter effort might include adding value to archival information systems through transcription, abstraction, and annotation of texts in electronic form and directing selection choices for digitization efforts. The end result, Evans postulates, is an “engineered archives, built by design and choice that makes end users our partners in preservation and access.” Stephen Brier’s case study of the September 11 Digital Archive -- which he calls “the intentional archive” -- echoes Max Evans’ notion of “built by design.” It also illustrates the key role of information technology -- building on accepted standards and practices -- in creating sustainable digital collections.

The September 11 Digital Archives rests on at least four essential collaborations. First, with the Sloan Foundation which recognized the public benefit in documenting this exceptional historical moment. Second, with the Center at George Mason which brought technical and historical skills. The third was the agreement with the Library of Congress to sustain this as a permanent collection -- the first digital collection on this scale and a responsibility which only a major

research institution could accept. Lastly, the essential collaboration was with the public whose recorded experiences the Archives sought to preserve. The project used an aggressive outreach program but also promised to treat the contributing public with fairness and dignity in this most sensitive circumstance.

Yesterday's panel on legal issues offered a valuable primer for preservation professionals who are not attorneys. We all need a grasp of basic legal concepts and current legal interpretations to guide us through the thickets of day to day professional practice. But we have a less passive role and responsibility as well. We must continue to articulate and advocate on behalf of our core values of openness and integrity of the historical record, especially in the face of current commercial and political pressures to close and control public inquiry. We must explain to a lay public the vital civic role of archives and museums in protecting the individual rights of citizens and in ensuring us collectively the ownership of our history. Each of our speakers gave us ideas and inspiration to help us face these tasks. I am very proud that the Society of American Archivists has joined with other associations in an activist stance on these issues and that the past two SAA presidential addresses -- by Peter Hirtle and Tim Ericson -- made this their central theme.

If, in the future, the work of preserving the past is to be a collaboration of professionals and the broad public, then the education of future professionals must equip them for this task. Ildiko DeAngelis points to the challenge of balancing theory and practice in the brief time available for a professional degree program. Students in her program will have an area of professional specialization but also skills in oral and written communications and a broad exposure to museum ethics. I assume they also will learn techniques for evaluating the educational effectiveness of exhibitions and public programs and for engaging diverse audiences in museum activities.

Tim Ericson added a different dimension to the notion of explaining archives to the public. If the idea of archives is obscure to many Americans, how much more remote is the notion of a career as an archivist? Ericson points out that this obscurity is one more reason why our ranks lack the diversity we need to look like the rest of America. (Ildiko DeAngelis also points to the high costs of graduate education and low salaries for this shortcoming.) Actually a good deal has been done to educate pre-collegiate students about archival materials: curriculum kits, National History Day projects, on-line documents and the like. But students -- and adults --- need to understand the role of archivists in the selection and preservation of these sources. This knowledge will make them better students of the past and give them a wider sense of career possibilities.

Speaking personally, I am called upon almost daily to explain the work of archives to the public. I explain to donors of collections why their materials are (or are not) historically significant and how we will care for them. I explain to researchers how we construct finding aids and other descriptive tools and how we derive rules for research use our holdings. To visiting students, VIPs, Elderhostel groups, and foreign dignitaries, I try to explain the archival enterprise and why it is important to them. In all of this I must avoid jargon, use telling examples, and be brief. As the head of an archival program, I expect that newly graduated archivists will come much better prepared than I was to undertake these fundamental tasks of public education, communication,

and advocacy. I also hope that these graduates will come with the technical knowledge and skills necessary to study the use and users of archives and to turn these studies into action steps to make our archival program more responsive and more effective.

In any professional or technical field it is easy for the practitioners to lose sight of the public as collaborator. Jan Paris points out that the traditional education of conservators taught them to view objects “primarily in terms of physical structure and chemical makeup....,” or, in Stephen Weil’s terms, “the thing” not the idea. Similarly, museum professionals for a long time conceptualized their field as built around the curation of physical artifacts, while archivists imagined their work largely in terms of its relationship to “the record.” Paris described her own rethinking of this issue and her proposal for “new paradigms for communication and decision-making that are centered on the user’s needs.” I believe that the long term goals of all preservation professionals and preservation institutions are furthered by the degree to which we become more transparent to our publics and the degree to which our publics become a central focus of our enterprise. And a good part of transparency is being explicit about the “meaning” of our collections. These were important themes of the first Choices and Challenges Symposium two years ago.

The case study of the preservation of the Hart-Parr #3 tractor, and the subsequent discussions, illustrate this notion of making our work more transparent. It began with a condensed explanation of the long term historical importance of the object and of the context for the subsequent preservation decisions. The project emphasized thorough documentation of the preservation work and new information gained during the complete restoration. It also added to the historical significance of the tractor by recording additional information about its actual use by family members. I hope that in the future exhibition of the restored tractor, this jewel of a story of historical analysis and preservation practice will be presented to a public audience that wants and needs to understand not only what we do but, and how we do it, but especially why we do it and why it matters.

Aside from the theme of collaboration, I want to point to two other topics over the past two days that caught my attention. Stephen Brier, Ann Russell, and others emphasized the fragility of our growing digital record -- whether born in that status or naturalized as digital citizen. I am pleased that the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has stepped up on the issue with support for training, but we will need national leadership and resources on a massive scale to reach a comfort level on this issue.

While we celebrate the wondrous ways in which the digital era has transformed access to historical materials, we are reminded by Karl Schlichting, Pete Daniel, Larry Jones, and Judith Endelman of the powerful immediacy of the real thing. Karl’s words echoed in my ear when I rode the Greenfield Village’s 1873 locomotive -- the oldest operating one in the country. The acrid sweet smell of coal smoke and steam, the metal on metal sounds of the massive pistons and wheels, and the sharp blast of the steam whistle are not a virtual experience. Indeed it may be that without this vivid experience of the operating machine, much of the meaning of the artifact is lost. Every archivist knows the similar power of experiencing the past through an especially poignant document. Judith rightly asks if born-digital media, which are presented not necessarily as created or received but as filtered through many intermediate communications and

presentation technologies, carry the same powerful connections to the past?

In concluding, I want to thank again The Henry Ford and its supporter, the Americana Foundation, for convening this symposium and to be so presumptuous to suggest two areas for the focus of future gatherings of curators and archivists. First, would be an explicit look at our publics. Who are the audiences for history? How do the findings of Rosenzweig and Thelen in *The presence of the Past* hold up today? Are museums and archives still trusted institutions? What is the level of understanding of the role and purpose of archives and museums among the public? What do we know from the myriad of exhibition evaluations and reviewed produced in the past decades? Who are the users of archives today? (We should give special attention to how the internet has touched on all these matters.) Lastly, who are the supporters of archives and museums? Who donates collections? Who provides financial support? Why?

A very different -- and even more ambitious -- symposium would take on the challenge of trying to imagine a collaborative documentary community or infrastructure. It would assess the roles of our national and regional voluntary professional and scholarly associations, of our graduate education programs, and of our university and research libraries and their associations and organizations. It would examine the strengths and weaknesses of the alphabet soup of national governmental agencies which provide direct support to archives and museums -- including NEH, NEA, IMLS, NSF, DOE, and NHPRC -- and the ways in which their separate mandates and programs do (and do not) operate to the larger good. We would ask similar questions of our national museum and archival institutions (the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution). The symposium would look too at private philanthropic support for our work. Could we imagine all these, together, as a more integrated whole on behalf of preserving a record of the past for future generations?